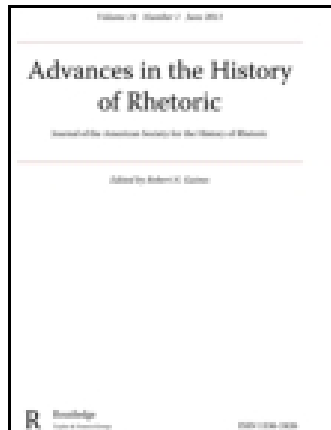


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## False Copies: Education, Imitation, and Citizenship in the Satyricon

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## False Copies: Education, Imitation, and Citizenship in the *Satyricon*

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*Petronius's Satyricon, long recognized as a commentary on rhetorical education, particularly declamation, forms a broad critique of (rhetorical) educational practices in the first century rooted in imitation—declamation, Greek Atticism, imperial rhetoric—and the types of citizens produced by such practices. Problematically, Petronius's critique, which seeks to redefine class based on a certain cultivated taste or judgment as opposed to material wealth, assumes an elite perspective and falls into the long dismissed “decline narrative” of Roman rhetoric once prevalent in the history of rhetoric. This article seeks to move beyond “Trimalchio vision,” a term used by art historian Lauren Hackworth Peterson to classify derogatory attitudes toward freedmen, to suggest that rhetorical education in the first century reached its intended audience, producing upwardly socially mobile administrators and city patrons in the empire. In other words, rhetorical education was reaching a mass audience in first-century Rome.*

Perhaps the most prevalent theme in the *Satyricon*, the first Roman novel written during the reign of Nero, likely by Petronius, is that a bad imitation is off-putting. Encolpius narrates a take on this theme near the end of the most famous scene of the *Satyricon*, the *Cena Trimalchionis*:

There would have been no end to our troubles if a last course had not been brought in, fieldfares made of fine meal and stuffed with raisins and nuts. There followed also quinces, stuck all over with thorns to look like sea-urchins. We could have bore this, if a far more fantastic dish had not driven us to prefer death by starvation. What we took to be a fat goose, with fish of all kinds and birds round it, was put on, and then Trimalchio said “My friends, whatever you see here on the table is made out of one

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body.” With my usual intelligence, I knew at once what it was; I looked at Agamemnon and said, “I shall be surprised if the whole thing is not made out of wax, or any rate clay. I have seen sham dinners of his kind served at the Saturnalia.” I had not finished speaking when Trimalchio said, As I hope to grow in gains and not in girth, my cook made the whole thing out of pig. (Petron., *Sat.* 69–70)

In this passage Encolpius takes exception with imitations that appear as one thing but are, in fact, quite another. Of course, in this scene the pig is not the only one made to do a bad impersonation. The Saturnalia comment is telling; the holiday provided a temporary inversion of power, where slaves dined before their masters. The reference here certainly suggests the narrator’s attitude toward his host’s position as a freedman who had amassed great wealth, though perhaps not social standing (Scheid 2003, 1360). Although the scene rather clearly links Trimalchio and the pig, Encolpius and virtually every character present are generally guilty of the same—performing a poor imitation. While this scene at the end of the *Cena* is perhaps not the most convincing passage to support the claim that the *Satyricon* as a whole and the *Cena* in particular form a commentary on rhetorical practices and education (particularly those involving *imitatio*, including Greek Atticism, imperial rhetoric, and declamation), it is one place in the text where the theme of corrupt imitation is most transparent. The *Satyricon*, then, forms a commentary on corrupt imitation, though the nature of that “corruption” differs greatly depending on the character in question.<sup>1</sup>

## RHETORIC AND THE *SATYRICON*

That the *Satyricon* forms a commentary on rhetorical practices in the first century is not a new claim; after all, the extant opening of the novel calls attention to this fact by beginning outside a school of declamation.<sup>2</sup> Many scholars including George Kennedy and Cecil Wooten have considered the role of rhetoric in the *Satyricon*. Kennedy begins with Encolpius’s opening “declamation” on schools of declamation given outside of one such establishment directed to the rhetorician Agamemnon, which yields, in my opinion, one of the best and perhaps most revealing lines in the novel: “With your permission I must tell you the truth, that you teachers more than anyone have been the ruin of true eloquence” (Petron., *Sat.* 2; Kennedy 1978, 172). What precedes this remark sounds very similar to charges against schools of declamation made by Quintilian, Tacitus, and Seneca—namely, that they do not deal with the stuff of the real world and therefore provide no practical training (Quint., *Inst.* 2.10.3; Sen., *Controv.* 1. preface 6–10; Tac., *Dial.* 39).<sup>3</sup>

Kennedy offers several other important notes on the exchange; first based on dialogue later in the novel, he stresses both Encolpius and Ascyltus

“live on their rhetorical education,” though he rejects the possibility that they are tutors (1978, 174). Rather he argues that they are the type of men who sustain themselves by fishing for dinner invitations.<sup>4</sup> This fishing, Kennedy argues, depends on Encolpius’s ability to impress Agamemnon as a *scholasticus*, that is, according to Kennedy, a “declamation-buff,” with his views on education and taste as a critic. Encolpius does this by espousing a position that Kennedy describes as “Greek Atticism of the most uncompromising kind,” though Kennedy reads it as a parody of such a position. Kennedy’s goal is merely to clarify the terminology and practices at the time, though he denies Petronius’s desire to “plead a consistent critical argument” (1978, 177–178).

Wooten too reads what follows in the *Satyricon* through the extant opening and the criticism of schools of declamation, though he is less hesitant to take the *Satyricon*, or at least parts of it, seriously (1976, 67). Wooten argues, like Kennedy, on the significance of the influence of declamation: “The characters in the *Satyricon* are intelligent and well-read; but they are immature, naïve, and shallow. From their education they have gotten an impression that life is romantic, dramatic, and exciting.” Finding real life less exciting than their school days, “they attempt, therefore to imitate the characters of literature, constantly casting around for literary parallels to their own daily lives, which destroys everything in their own personalities that is natural and spontaneous” (1976, 70). Wooten goes on to support his point by comparing scenes in the novel to the declamations found in Seneca, arguing there are many parallels. He, then, cautiously extends this “play-acting” to the practices in Nero’s court, concluding, “[I]t would not be surprising therefore that Petronius, in conjuncture with his attack on the rhetorical education based on declamation, is also reflecting in his novel the self-conscious artificiality which must have been apparent everywhere among Nero and his court” (1976, 72).

Given the claims of Kennedy and Wooten, then, it is perhaps not controversial to read the *Satyricon* as a commentary on rhetorical education. Still, these claims are relatively narrow, applying generally to declamation and the upper classes, if not the elite. These claims should be broadened: however one might read the *Satyricon*, it is a commentary on social class and widening access to (rhetorical) education necessitated by the growing administrative needs of the Roman Empire that calls into question the products of educational practices rooted in imitation.

## MOBILITY AND THE “MASSES”

The *Augustales* offered the possibility of social advancement to (some) freed slaves of the Roman Empire. The *Augustales* held a low-level magistrate position in Italian towns that was open to very rich (those with more

than 100,000 *sestertii*) freedmen (*libertini*), who occupied a social position between the *ordo decuriones* and the people (Laird 2002, 22). The position, which offered social advancement to those otherwise barred from holding religious or political office because of their servile past, was, perhaps more than anything else, characterized by significant shows of beneficence to the towns in which these men lived (Ostrow 1985, 69, 71).<sup>5</sup>

Petronius's Trimalchio is the only *Augustales* to have made his way into the literary record. It is clear from a variety of incidents in the *Satyricon* and Encolpius's reactions that he finds Trimalchio vulgar, crass, uneducated, superstitious, and, above all, a social climber. Petronius's portrayal of Trimalchio contrasts sharply with what we know of the *Augustales* from the material record—namely, that, at least in Campania (where the *Satyricon* is set), the *Augustales* seem, for all intents and purposes, to have been fully assimilated into the local elite (Peterson 2006, 70; Woods 1991, 95).<sup>6</sup> Because of this, Lauren Hackworth Peterson has cautioned against reading the *Augustales* through Petronius, a phenomenon she calls “Trimalchio vision,” because such readings “risk perpetuating ancient elite, pejorative attitudes about ex-slaves” (2006, 10). Often, according to Peterson, Trimalchio vision has reared its head among art historians (mistakenly) interpreting interior design as “shameless imitation” of elite houses, characterized by a “lack of taste” and “ostentation” (2006, 88, 131). These characteristics certainly apply to Trimalchio as depicted by Petronius and extend far beyond his choice of home decor. Following Peterson's argument, Petronius renders Trimalchio as a representation of an ultra-elite critique on the nouveau riche, which separates wealth from class, mainly by defining (a cultivated or educated) taste which Trimalchio does not possess (2006, 17–18). I would argue, then, that if there is a serious, critical point to the *Satyricon*, it is in the corruption and even perversion of rhetorical education, specifically the practice of imitation, to cultivate judgment or taste from an elite perspective.

In the early Roman Empire, the new political situation and an influx of foreign-born residents of Rome, coupled with the expanding administrative needs of the empire, created a situation where social mobility, often used as a reward for service to the state, became increasingly possible and even necessary. These new practices of citizenship and new citizens necessitated public access to once-private exemplars. While a variety of practices came together—Greek Atticism, Epicureanism, traditional Roman funerary practices, and declamation—all stressed imitation of exemplars that were more accessible, often in material form, to the populace. While, no doubt, only a select few benefited in terms of social mobility from access to such exemplars, there was, nonetheless, a backlash, as demonstrated by Petronius, meant to redefine the “cultivated taste” and judgment that was traditionally the product of “good birth” and (rhetorical) education.

## IMITATION AND RHETORICAL EDUCATION

Early imperial rhetoric, as I have argued elsewhere, was based largely on the practice of imitation with the *princeps*, Augustus, establishing himself as an exemplar for imitation while also constructing state building projects meant to model ideal practices of citizenship, most notably the so-called Hall of Fame, which held statues of great men from Rome's history coupled with inscriptions recounting their titles and deeds.<sup>7</sup> While imitation had certainly always been a cornerstone of Roman education and rhetorical education, specifically, which stressed the imitation of great orators, the first century saw a convergence of instructional practices based on *imitatio*, both those traditionally Roman and those new to the city.<sup>8</sup>

Elite Roman families had long since kept wax funeral masks of their deceased ancestors coupled with familial archives that entered public view during funeral processions and public memory through eulogies.<sup>9</sup> These largely private models, no doubt significant in shaping familial *auctoritas*, became more publicly accessible in as much as they influenced published volumes, for example, Varro's sketches of illustrious Romans or book 6 of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and also in the form of the statues of the Hall of Fame in the Forum of Augustus, which was likely replicated in cities throughout Campania such as Pompeii. At the same time, traditional Roman practices came together with Epicureanism and Greek Atticism, leading to encyclopedic volumes and equally encyclopedic sculpture gardens rooted in the Greek *paideia*, for example, Dionysius of Halicarnassus's *The Ancient Orators* and the sculptures in Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus's *Villa de Papyri*.<sup>10</sup> These models for imitation were perhaps meant, at least in the case of state sponsorship, to guide practices of civic participation and develop virtue and judgment for Roman citizens. As these models proliferated, so too did the practice of declamation, which was, of course, itself a practice of imitation with *suasoria* and *controversia* imitating deliberative and forensic speeches, respectively.<sup>11</sup>

## RHETORICAL ANXIETY

During the *Cena* there are multiple points of tension about class and education among Trimalchio's dinner guests. For example, after accusing Agamemnon of ridiculing the "way we poor people speak," Echion, a "clothes dealer" and guest of Trimalchio, recounts the education of two young boys in his care, one of whom he professes to have the potential to study with, if not be like, Agamemnon, the rhetoric professor. The other, who Echion has dissuaded from studying literature and instead encouraged in the study of the law, may have potential as a property manager.

Echion then mutters the somewhat perplexing line, *Litterae thesaurum est, et artificium nunquam moritur*, perhaps inadequately translated as “Yes, education is a treasure, and culture [or skill] never dies,” which seems to correlate education and (the) earning potential (of slaves) in a way that vaguely calls to mind (a Roman version) of the knack/art debate concerning rhetoric (Petron., *Sat.* 46).<sup>12</sup> With that line lingering, several more conversations revolve around appropriate forms of (rhetorical) education and the uses thereof.<sup>13</sup> Given the limited space of this forum, the discussion of two examples will have to suffice.

A telling moment occurs when Ascyrtos, the traveling companion of Encolpius, and then Giton, Encolpius’s “servant” boy, find themselves in a conflict with Hermeros, a freedman (and presumably also an *Augustalis*) friend of Trimalchio. The conflict begins because Ascyrtos is mocking Trimalchio. Hermeros quickly comes to his host’s defense calling into question Ascyrtos’s class (apparently he’s of the equestrian order, though Hermeros claims higher, though foreign birth); profession (or lack thereof—Hermeros calls Ascyrtos a *larifuga*, a “vagabond”); and significantly, his manners. When Giton chuckles at the exchange, Hermeros quickly turns on him, holding his master (*dominus*) responsible for his rude behavior and suggesting master and boy are of similar character (Petron., *Sat.* 57–58).

Wrapped up in the exchange is an odd discussion of education. While Hermeros admits he has no formal schooling, he claims to be literate and argues that the education he received as a slave is better than Ascyrtos’s rhetorical education predominantly because he knows how to act properly, and he indicts Ascyrtos’s *magister*, his teacher, for his shortcoming (Petron., *Sat.* 57–58).<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, Agamemnon, who is apparently a bit older (*homo maior natus*), is held out by Hermeros as someone with better judgment for liking Trimalchio and company (*placemus illi*). From this exchange, it is clear that questions of the soundness of contemporary education, specifically rhetorical education, are not only leveled at Trimalchio and hinge on appropriateness and decorum. In other words, Ascyrtos has had the advantages of a relatively high birth and formal rhetorical education; however, as Kennedy notes, he and Encolpius seem to be using their taste and judgment, that is, the products of their education, as little more than a skill to get a free meal (1978, 174).

Another telling example occurs when Trimalchio says, “Agamemnon, what declamation did you deliver in school to-day? Of course, I do not practice in court myself, but I learned literature for domestic purposes. And do not imagine that I despise learning. I have got two libraries, one Greek and one Latin” (Petron., *Sat.* 48). Of course, what follows suggests that Trimalchio does not possess the discerning judgment of the declamation buff, nor does he seem to have much absorbed much from the works in his library. Still, Nicholas Horsfall has recounted a number of instances where Trimalchio seems to have bought in wholesale to the behaviors modeled



by Augustus and imperial rhetoric, including his Greek and Latin libraries, possibly patterned on Augustus's in the Temple of Palatine Apollo and his recitation of Virgil during the *Cena*—as Horsfall puts it the “bible” of Julio-Claudian ideology and education (1989a, 80, 78).

In some ways Trimalchio is a success based on the models put forth by Augustus and imperial rhetoric in the first century—he is a foreign-born slave who immigrated to Italy, amassed great wealth, bought his freedom, and used his wealth in service to his community (in tasks that once fell to the aristocracy); in return, Trimalchio has been rewarded with a magistrate position. And yet the word often used to describe Trimalchio's behavior is “aping.”<sup>15</sup> But if Trimalchio is an ape, Encolpius is a “chamaeleon”; as Brett Boyce argues, Encolpius is “readily adopting the characteristics of his companions: a declamatory tone with the rhetorician Agamemnon, a melodramatic and mock-heroic manner with Giton and Ascyltos, a frank and conversational idiom with Quartilla, and a flowery and romantic language with Circe” (1991, 31). While Encolpius uses his judgment and taste not in service of the state but as a skill to leech off rich men, Trimalchio serves his city but seemingly has no judgment or taste. These examples from the *Cena* and the characters of Trimalchio and Encolpius more broadly suggest that class standing was becoming hotly contested as the empire grew. While once good birth, wealth, and education were all a Roman man needed to distinguish himself, more widely available (rhetorical) education and the possibility of financial success in the first century were undermining traditional standards of class—though, as the *Cena* suggests, not without backlash.

## CONCLUSION

Lest we forget Encolpius's indictment of Agamemnon's profession, “with your permission I must tell you the truth, that you teachers more than anyone have been the ruin of true eloquence,” it is the teachers of rhetoric—whether offering training in declamation, Greek Atticism, or even the so-called practical genres—who brought imitation to the forefront of Roman education (Petron., *Sat.* 2). After all, as Joy Connolly (1998) argues, “[R]hetorical education became the means by which Roman youths might imbibe an ideology of manly virtue [including “gender, class, and nation”], through the process of exemplum, repetition, and performance that were embedded in the technicalities of oratorical practice” (133). Imperial rhetoric, guided by rhetorical theory and educational practices, took up the same process. Dionysius of Halicarnassus writing in the first century praises “the present age and the men who guide its culture—that they were pioneers of good taste over bad” (Dion. Hal., *The Ancient Orators* 2). Writing about Dionysius specifically, Jeffrey Walker (2000) claims that his “writings bespeak an advanced Isocratean *paideia* devoted, on one hand, to historical and



political-philosophical inquiry and, on the other, to detailed critical study and imitation of exemplary practitioners of discursive art as opposed to (or in addition to) the narrowly practical *paideia* that Cicero's Crassus dismisses as not worthless but elementary and insufficient" (110). Broadly, then, rhetorical education—both practical and philosophical—in the first century was rooted largely in imitation, and the result of that education was taste and, it was hoped, the corresponding good judgment.

Petronius's critique is of the types of citizens produced by rhetorical education. Encolpius and Ascyltos are, presumably, Roman citizens (of the equestrian order) with access to education—the type of men who could potentially become great orators, and they are little better than grifters; while newcomers like Trimalchio, who have capitalized just enough on education to advance financially and socially, have taken over as patrons of their cities but are far from embodying the Greek *paideia* or Roman ideology necessary to lead. The picture that Petronius draws is not one of the best and the brightest minds leading the state, and he holds teachers of rhetoric responsible. His Encolpius, Ascyltos, and Trimalchio are as off-putting as the final course of the *Cena*, and one is left to wonder who is running the empire.

But perhaps all is not lost. Just as art historians have recouped the *Augustales* from "Trimalchio vision," it is important to recognize the *Satyricon* as an ultra-elite critique of rhetorical education, one that very much participates in the long-dismissed "decline narrative."<sup>16</sup> For scholars of rhetoric, seeing outside Trimalchio vision requires recognizing the Hume-like call for "taste" for what it is—a means of maintaining threatened (class) privilege in the face of broadening access to (rhetorical) education in the form of imitable exemplars. Rather than seeing Trimalchio as an "ape" devoid of education, culture, judgment, or taste, perhaps we should see the fictional *Augustalis* as a sign that rhetorical education hit its mark in the first century, producing citizens who imitated the models of Roman learning put forth in state rhetoric and who gave generously as citizens to their communities.

## NOTES

1. Other practices of imitation that influenced the *Satyricon* are well documented, and often references to *mimesis* and *imitatio* in the *Satyricon* call attention to these influences, which include mime and poetry (see Harrison 2003, 1150; Boyce 1991, 14).

2. Numerous scholars discuss rhetoric in the *Cena* (for example, see Shey 1971, 84). In addition, the *Cena* is widely accepted as a parody of Plato's *Symposium* (Harrison 2003, 1150).

3. Pernot (2005, 129–130) discusses this decline theory in some detail.

4. Such men are often known as *scurra*, often translated as "buffoons" or "dandies" (though this term can also refer to the actors in a pantomime). Interestingly, neither Kennedy nor Petronius uses this phrase (for example, see Sen., *Suas.* 2.12). These men are closely related with offensive humor, *scurrilitas*, which is cautioned against in Cicero's discussion of wit as unbecoming to the orator primarily because it "will suit the lower ranks of society" (Cic., *De Or.* 2.60.244–246; Quint., *Inst.* 6.3.29).

5. The material improvements made by the *Augustales* are largely known to us through epigraphical evidence (see Ostrow 1985, 69, 71).

6. Scholars base the claim of assimilation on grave position, honors (public funerals, theater seats), and *Augustales*' sons standing for office (see Peterson 2006, 70; Woods 1991, 95).
7. For a brief description of the "Hall of Fame" as providing models for imitation, see Lamp (2013, 74–77).
8. For a discussion of imitation in early Roman education, see Bonner (1977, 109–126). See also Terence, *Ad.* 414; Quint., 1.1.27–29; 1.11.2–3, 10.2.3, 10.2.8, 10.2.14–15; Cicero, *De Or.* 1.34, 2.22, 2.59, 2.60.
9. See Polybius, 52.11; 53.4–6; Pliny, *HN* 35.6.
10. Piso was a relative of Julius Caesar and friend of the Epicurean philosopher Philodemus (see Badian 2003, 281).
11. Some scholars make the case that social mobility was used as a reward for good behavior (Ostrow 1990, 376; Ostrow 1985, 71; Woods 1991, 34).
12. Horsfall (1989b, 203–205) reads this exchange primarily as about the earning potential attached to education.
13. Schnur (1957, 101) argues that rhetoric is condemned as a whole in these comments and throughout the *Satyricon*. I would argue that the condemnation is more nuanced than a wholesale dismissal.
14. Hermeros specifically identifies Ascylos as being trained in rhetoric. Horsfall argues that there was a great financial incentive to educate slaves, and it is likely that Hermeros was "trained at an elementary school and not within the slave household" based on the skills Hermeros seems to possess (1989b, 205).
15. The *Augustales* most often, it seems, contributed to the material improvement of the city, a much-needed service and one modeled in imperial rhetoric (Kellum 1981, 116–118).
16. While I would, and have, argued that scholars of rhetoric cannot quite shake the decline narrative, the narrative that the practice of rhetoric "declined" in the first centuries has largely been discredited by scholars (for examples, see Pernot 2005, 131; Kennedy 1994, 186–191; Walker 2000, 88).

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